
Document WSIS/PC-2/CONTR/90
14 February 2003
English only

Contribution of the Universal Postal Union to the preparatory process of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) - Geneva 2003 and Tunis 2005

THE ROLE OF POSTAL SERVICES IN SHAPING THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

An information document for the WSIS Summit outlining the UPU's strategic position in the context of the WSIS Declaration of Principles and Plan of action

Berne
14 February 2003

Rationale for UPU involvement in the WSIS

International framework:

1. The UN Millennium Declaration and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are powerful tools for economic and social development.
2. The right to communicate is recognized as a fundamental human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
3. The UN General Assembly resolutions on WSIS recognize the pivotal role of the United Nations system in promoting development, particularly with respect to access to and the transfer of information and communication technologies. As a specialized agency of the United Nations system, the UPU participates actively in the effort to promote cooperation among the various information and communication technology initiatives.
4. The UN General Assembly resolutions on WSIS also encourage all relevant UN bodies to make contributions to and to participate in the preparatory process of the Summit and in the Summit itself.

UPU Postal framework

1. The UPU Constitution and Convention highlight the fundamental role of the Universal Postal Union in developing communication between peoples through the efficient operation of postal services.
2. The UPU's long term global postal strategy makes reference to the dramatic changes taking place in the worldwide communications environment and to the role of ICTs in adapting to those changes.
3. UPU Member countries and regional postal organizations have also developed their postal strategies following the same or similar trends
4. The UPU and many of its member postal administrations have taken on an advocacy role in promoting postal services as an essential part of the current and future information society.

Background

The communications and information revolution – the term "revolution" is not too strong in this context – is affecting every area of human life, in every part of the world. Information and communication technologies (ICT) have enormous potential to reshape and transform the ways in which people organize their lives, interact with each other and participate in the various spheres of society. The world is still at the very beginning of the process of transformation, and the future will certainly provide its share of new and challenging ICT discoveries.

The dramatic changes in the communication marketplace have also had an impact on the Universal Postal Union. UPU member postal administrations are major players in the global paper-based communication industry, providing a vast array of services to the population.

The postal services of the UPU's 189 member countries form the largest physical distribution network in the world. Almost six million postal employees work in more than 700.000 postal outlets to ensure that some 430 billion mail and other paper-based products are processed and delivered each year to all corners of the world. The network is even larger if we add the people who prepare and print the magazines, newspapers, books, advertising and other printed material that the postal administrations deliver, as well as the other providers of physical communication services.

Therefore, in spite of the rapid growth of electronic communication services, the existence of physical communication infrastructure, as provided by postal services, remains an essential element in the exchange of information in both developed and developing countries. In developing countries the postal service is, in some areas, the only communications link that serves the entire population. Business and commerce also depend upon and benefit from physical communication. UPU and other studies indicate that the physical communication network will remain a viable alternative and a reliable means of exchanging information for a long time to come.

The UPU vision of the future holds that substantive and sustainable development in the information society of the 21st century cannot be conceived and achieved on a worldwide basis without integrating **all** existing and future communication infrastructures and services, including postal and other physical communication services.

The new ICTs have enormous potential, but they should not be seen as a universal *vademecum* that can cure all possible "information and communications diseases" in the world. The physical component is also necessary. In this view, postal services are not part of a sunset industry, but rather will continue, well into the future, to play a significant role in the world's economy and in the world's information society.

Universal Postal Service

The worldwide postal service has a unique set of assets - universal coverage, full service capacity, a trained workforce and prime locations. The UPU helps to meet global information expectations through the concept of universal postal service, which means the provision of quality communication services allowing citizens and businesses to send and receive messages and other paper-based goods from any point in the world to any other point.

With this fundamental principle the UPU clearly reaffirms its goal of connecting within each country and around the globe, the senders and receivers of postal communication. The UPU will continue to assign high priority to universal postal service, considering that this is a unique and efficient strategy to respond to the needs, requirements and aspirations of all segments of the information society.

Postal services and ICTs

Even though the core postal business will remain for a long time the delivery of paper - based traditional products, the world's postal services have come to realize the benefits of applying information and communication technologies to improve the quality of these and other new products, to meet growing needs for reliable, affordable and rapid services with a high level of technological added value. Hybrid mail combining electronic transmission and a physical delivery, and the range of diversified on-line services based on Internet can be given as examples.

By extending their universal delivery commitment to the on-line world, postal services can ensure that citizens have better and easier access to internet connectivity and e-mail. A growing number of UPU member postal administrations have intensified their cooperation with the telecommunication sector to develop tele-kiosks and communications centers in particular in developing countries.

The UPU, a specialized agency of the United Nations

The UPU itself, as a specialized agency of the United Nations, is seeking on a continual basis to further develop and maximize the effectiveness of its information and communication technology strategies. It has put in place in its Berne Headquarters a technology center with experts engaged in developing and implementing member country ICT projects. This effort is supported by a Telematics Cooperative, with over 100 countries as members, and a region-based support service.

The UPU has also sought to develop new partnerships with the private sector involved in the postal business and willing to invest in joint communications projects. It has doubled its efforts to seek new financial arrangements for ICT projects and to strengthen existing commitments with UPU member countries and with other stakeholders in the postal industry.

Finally, the UPU organizes on a regular basis international conferences and other fora for discussion and exchanges of experience in the area of ICT. Member postal administrations are in this way encouraged to contribute to raising the international postal community's awareness of the strategic importance of the new information and communication technologies.